

# THE STRUGGLE FOR LAND

A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF  
THE PIONEER FRONTIER IN BRAZIL  
FROM 1930 TO THE PRESENT DAY

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## I

### The pioneer frontier: political violence and the peasantry

#### The pioneer frontier: specificity and generality

The aim of this book is to reach an understanding of the pioneer frontier in Brazil. The object of study is conceived as the particular process of frontier expansion occurring in the country over the last half century. This concept of frontier in no way corresponds to the so-called cyclical character of economic growth and occupation of land in Brazil. There is, therefore, no intention here of following precedent (Normano 1935; Castro 1969) and presenting the entire economic history of the country in terms of its 'frontier' experiences. These growth cycles have been observed to follow the economic booms in different products for export to the world market – such as sugar, gold, coffee and rubber – and have depended on new demands arising within that expanding market over the centuries (Prado 1962a; Furtado 1963). The pioneer frontier, on the contrary, has expanded in response to the demands of the national market and in function of economic accumulation within the national economy since 1930.

It is to be expected that as the concept of frontier gains currency it will lose content. There is already an account which assimilates most of Latin American history to the idea of 'frontier' (Hennessey 1978). So it must be clear at the outset that the pioneer frontier is a process of occupation of new lands which is historically specific. The period of the process corresponds to the period of Brazil's most rapid rates of industrialisation and urbanisation, and begins at the moment when the Brazilian economy, for the first time in its history, experiences a large labour surplus (arguments which are taken up in Chapter 3). Just as the national economy grows 'in depth' in the industrial and financial centres so it grows 'in breadth' through the extension of the pioneer frontier. The frontier expresses not any and all economic activities directed to the world market, but the particular activity which integrates unexplored regions into the national economy. The process is propelled by the forces and contradictions of this economy.

Where the history of this economy is viewed 'cyclically' the cycles represent the rise and fall of economic activity in general in one or other region of the country at different times. The process of the pioneer frontier is also viewed cyclically but with the crucial differ-

ence that here the cycle is one of accumulation and appropriation of a surplus which can occur simultaneously on diverse frontiers throughout the country. In the review of the historical 'cycles' it seems not to matter whether the export boom was based on slave, servile or 'free' labour; in other words the analysis is not focussed on the mode of production, but advanced at the level of the world market. In the case of the pioneer frontier cycle however, it is important to the analysis that the national economy is clearly capitalist. While the mechanisms of accumulation on the frontier may not themselves be capitalist, the surplus is expropriated not only by speculative and commercial but also by industrial capital. Within this perspective the frontier cycle is primarily determined by the capitalist social relations which dominate the social formation, and is achieved through a wide range of political, legal and ideological interventions by a particular form of the capitalist State.

These assertions are intended to bring the principal premises of the argument into view. They do not deny the historical diversity of the pioneer frontier experiences in Brazil, but nevertheless maintain that the different frontiers with their particular features are all part of the one secular process of the occupation of the land in modern Brazil, and, as such, are all equally the historical result of a similar set of determinations. Until now, the diversity of the experiences appears to have discouraged attempts at a general approach to the question of the frontier. The classic accounts by Monbeig (1952) and Roche (1959 and 1968) eschewed the problem of generality, and were confined to a careful analysis of particular experiences; contemporary accounts on the other hand by Velho (1972) and Martins (1975) attempt to develop typologies of the frontier, so dividing it into distinct phenomena (the 'expanding frontier'; the 'demographic frontier') which seem to deny the one process. The premises of the present approach to the problem, however, not only insist on what it is that makes these frontiers distinct but also what it is they have in common; the aim is to demonstrate both the specificity and generality of the pioneer frontier.

These opening remarks take on relevance in the face of the empirical reality. While most frontiers move onto virgin lands at the limits of penetration into the interior, others may 're-discover' regions which had previously known occupation during an economic boom (like the Baixo Rio Doce or Espírito Santo), or enter areas which had previously been by-passed for lack of economic attraction at the time. The virgin lands they occupy may be covered with tropical jungle (Pará), pine forest (Paraná), savanna and scrub (Goiás and Mato Grosso), or natural pastures. The soil on the frontier may be sandy and

acid, or rich and fertile. The dominant economic activity will vary from casual to organised extractive activity, from small-scale farming to large-scale cattle raising; and the level of technology employed will range from the rudimentary combination of land and labour in 'slash and burn' agriculture to highly capitalised agro-industrial enterprises. Finally, the frontier may be almost entirely isolated or may be integrated by asphalt roads and a developed marketing network into regional and national economies.

In addition to differences of this order the final pattern of settlement on the frontier may vary radically. In some cases the frontier will continue to absorb a large flux of migrants over a long period of time, and the land will be occupied by small farmers engaged in regular agricultural production. Such settlement has occurred in the north-east of Rio Grande do Sul, the west of Santa Catarina, the west and north of Paraná, the south of Mato Grosso, areas of the centre-west of São Paulo, the south of Goiás, the valley of the river Doce in Minas Gerais, a large part of Espírito Santo, the west of Maranhão, and today in areas of Pará and Rondônia. Elsewhere the migrants to the frontier have been lucky to farm the land for two or three years – if at all. Increasingly in Brazil, and especially in Amazônia, land on the frontier is taken over by large holdings and large enterprise, dedicated more often than not to cattle-raising. In these cases the cattle grow fat on fine pastures, while the people go hungry.

Despite this diversity of experience, it is possible to generalise about the pioneer frontier by means of a political economy which locates it in the context of the national economy and society, and explains the expansion at the level of accumulation. For instance, it may be relatively and increasingly rare for pioneers on the frontier to stay on the land and farm it, but nevertheless it is they who repeatedly take on the task of clearing the land and by their labour create value; it may have been yet rarer in the past for those who did stay on the land to become healthy homesteaders like those of North America, but nevertheless they produced values for the national market. The problem in approaching the difference between 'farming' and 'cattle' frontiers, on the one hand, or the regime of minifundio, on the other, is to discover the production and market relations which achieve the appropriation of this value and so establish their place in the cycle of accumulation on the frontier. Some of the apparent differences in these diverse experiences can be assimilated by referring them to the different production and market relations existing at different 'stages' of the accumulation cycle (which is the argument of Chapter 2). Some of the major similarities, on the other hand, can only be understood once it is discovered that much of the accumulation takes place

outside and beyond production and market relations, by means of a form of primitive accumulation (which is the theoretical position adopted in Chapter 8).

Thus the argument of the book makes bold to talk of the pioneer frontier in general, but – it will be seen – this same argument refers repeatedly to three particular frontiers. I can best explain this by speaking personally for a paragraph. The argument is made general because I wished to construct a political economy of the frontier; but the references are particular because there exist very few regional studies which are useful to this effort, and I have drawn heavily on my own field work in the west of Paraná, south of Mato Grosso and south of Pará. The case material from these regions forms a large part of the empirical base of the study, and I submit that without this field work the study would have suffered from a lack of documentation. But while it may be clear why I present case material of this kind at all, it is equally important to explain why I went to *these* frontiers – among the many possible options for research. It is not only necessary but will be useful to defend my choice of case material, as in doing so I can conveniently preview the principal organisational themes of the book.

#### Paraná, Mato Grosso and Pará: the question of periodisation

It will do no harm to begin with the obvious. The very size and regional diversity of Brazil has always made generalisations about the country precarious. As the investigations of the frontiers in question were designed to illumine a political economy of the frontier at the level of national society, a minimum condition of the choice dictated that these frontiers lie in different regions of the country. The west of Paraná and the south of Mato Grosso lie in the south and centre-west, respectively, while the south of Pará is situated in the north (below the mouth of the Amazon). This same geographical spread further implies that the ecological environment (soils, climate, vegetation) of the frontier varies widely from one case to another. At the same time these frontiers demonstrate different patterns of occupation, deriving from the different historical conditions of control and appropriation of the land; from the different impact of extractive industries; from the intensity and timing of migration onto the frontier. These patterns of occupation are examined in detail in the following chapter, but, by way of illustration, the west of Paraná sees a heavy influx of small-holders onto lands covered by virgin pine forest; the south of Mato Grosso sees a similar experience but within a region of traditionally large landholdings owned by big companies and local political bosses; and in Pará the traditional leasing of land for extractive industry is



submerged by the competition between big capital and small peasants for this land, in the wake of the Federal State road-building programme.

While all these varying conditions were pertinent, the central consideration governing the choice of case material was that frontier expansion into these three regions occurred at different *periods* (within the overall period of the expansion of the pioneer frontier, as suggested above). So, very approximately, the frontier in the west of Paraná expanded most rapidly between 1945 and 1970, that of the south of Mato Grosso between 1955 and 1975, and that of the south of Pará from 1965 to the present. Moreover, this 'lag' between Paraná and Pará is not merely coincidental insofar as it is the 'closing' of the frontiers in the south which contributes to propel their expansion into the Amazon region of the north (Katzman 1977a). The significance of the difference in period is simple but far reaching. It allows the investigation of the *changes* in the process of the pioneer frontier which reflect more or less directly the changes occurring at the level of the national political economy.

In effect, a large part of the historiography insists, in the first place, on the changes made by the 'Revolution' of 1964 in the national political and administrative structures, which are demonstrated most strikingly by the greatly increased power and penetration of the Federal State apparatuses, and by the consequent decline in the political power and autonomy of the local state administrations (such as those of Paraná, Mato Grosso and Pará). Moreover, there are those who see these changes at the political level as necessary and logical adjustments to the new social realities created by the changing structure of the Brazilian economy in the modern period: the increasing preponderance of foreign monopoly capital in the manufacturing sector and the rapid, if highly selective, capitalisation of the countryside. Evidently, things 'economic' and things 'political' cannot be divorced in this context, and the greater number, range and autonomy of the Federal regional and sectoral agencies represents both a response to the greater complexities and contradictions of the economy and an extension of State participation in the process of accumulation (growth of State manufacturing and mining sectors). But the main point emerges clearly: the period of the pioneer frontier is not a homogeneous period at the level of the national political economy, and this is necessarily reflected in the process of frontier expansion.

There is no doubt that changes at the level of national economy and national polity bring changes to the pioneer frontier. This is seen especially in the impact of the political on the economic. For example,

the investigation of frontiers in different periods allows a demonstration of the greater relative autonomy of the local state administrations in the period before 1964 (in Mato Grosso and Paraná) and the progressive, but certainly not total, loss of such autonomy after 1964 (in the cases of Pará and Paraná). These changes at the political level impinge directly upon the process of accumulation on the frontier by altering in some degree the relative participation of local and national dominant classes in the appropriation of the surplus and by concentrating bureaucratic intervention in this process at the Federal level. None of this is yet meant to raise the question of the 'final' determination of these changes; the relation between local states and the Federal State is important partly because it is itself visible, and partly because it provides a clear view of how accumulation on the frontier is achieved. For these reasons it emerges as a major theme of the book, and the difference in frontier periods captures changes in this relation, and hence gains insights into the changing structure of State in Brazil.

If this was all there was to be said on the question of period, then it would have been analytically advantageous to present the case material chronologically, so that all was known about Paraná, for example, before broaching the case of Pará. Such an approach would certainly have been more considerate of the reader. As it is, the exposition of the material switches back and forth between the different cases in a way which must occasionally be very demanding of the reader. In other words, the argument rejects the difference in period of these experiences as the principal element of their comparison and compares the different frontiers directly despite the difference in period. This strategy is preferred in the firm conviction that whatever the changes symbolised by the Revolution of 1964, far more significant in the political economy of both nation and frontier over the period are their *continuities*. The choice of frontiers at different periods allows an appraisal of the changes, but their direct comparison is designed to demonstrate and emphasise the continuities.

Within this perspective the changes at the economic level in the degree of concentration of capital in the economy at large, and in the degree and rate of capitalisation of production in the countryside, are precisely changes in degree which do not transform the dominant social relations of production in the economy, nor the primary economic determination of frontier expansion as a cycle of accumulation. It is true that monopoly capital domination of the economy may actually accelerate this cycle of accumulation, and that, increasingly, capitalist social relations may emerge towards the end of each cycle, but, equally, the form of primitive accumulation peculiar to the

pioneer frontier continues, and the role of the frontier in reproducing the conditions of accumulation in the Brazilian countryside remains essentially the same.

There are at least two ways in which this position might be modified. In the first place, as indicated above, the relative participation of different fractions of capital (local, national, monopoly) in the appropriation of surplus from the frontier may change over time, and consequently so may the application of the surplus. However, there is evidence to suggest that changes of this sort, if they reflect changes in the national political economy, are also directly related to the different 'stages' of the accumulation cycle on the frontier (as is argued in Chapters 2, 6 and 8). In the second place, at a yet higher level of abstraction, the frontier is seen as reproducing the conditions of accumulation in the countryside, which, traditionally, has meant the reproduction of a highly concentrated pattern of land-ownership, and the extension, partly by means of this monopoly in land, of a sub-capitalist economic environment. In this conceptual paradigm the 'national society' is seen as a social formation characterised by the *articulation* of different modes of production, where the capitalist mode is dominant. Let it be said immediately that such concepts demand systematic historical specification before they can become useful tools for analysis – and this is part of the burden of the book. The point to note here is that the role of the frontier in reproducing the articulation remains the same, but the form of the articulation may change with the (selective) emergence of capitalist social relations in the countryside.

Within this same perspective the changes in the lines of command at the institutional level and the degree and depth of the political penetration of the frontier are again, precisely, changes of degree which do not alter, in any essential way, the kinds of political and ideological intervention occurring on the frontier. The institutional initiatives may change, as a result, for instance, of the changing bureaucratic balance between local state and Federal State; but, in so far as political and ideological intervention on the frontier contributes to achieve an appropriation of surplus and to complete the cycle of accumulation, then they constitute *forms of mediation* which remain the same over time. Mediation is defined here, in its broadest sense, as the process of institutionalisation of class struggle, which is always a struggle for social surplus, and, on the frontier, is also a struggle for land.

The dimensions of this struggle are discussed below. The characteristic mediations of the struggle on the frontier are law, bureaucracy and violence. In this connection, the strategy in the presentation of

case material is two-fold: certain material appears recurrently in the argument, but in so far as it demonstrates the operation of different characteristic forms of mediation its relevance alters as the argument advances; at the same time the comparison of different frontiers demonstrates the continuities of these characteristic forms over time. The broad contention here is that the cycle of accumulation of the frontier cannot be understood without a clear conception of the question of mediation; for this reason analysis of the place of law, bureaucracy and violence in the struggle on the frontier occupies much of the central part of the book.

Overall, and taking things 'economic' and things 'political' together, the choice and order of presentation of the empirical data on which the argument is based should now be comprehensible. The greatest weight is given to the case of Paraná, because it so clearly straddles the 'divide' of the Revolution of 1964, and so provides material for demonstrating both changes and continuities. The case of Pará is the most 'modern', and is designed to provide insight into what is happening contemporarily in Amazônia. Mato Grosso receives least attention, but should not for that reason be ignored: a proper reading of this case will correct possible misinterpretations of the presence of large capital and massive Federal intervention in Amazônia as being 'new' phenomena in the political economy of the pioneer frontier. In Mato Grosso the Laranjeiras company monopolised huge tracts of land and kept the migrants off it; the Federal State intervened both economically with a large infrastructure project (the Northwest Railroad), and politically with the large-scale appropriation of private and local state land (the Federal Territory of Ponta Porã) and all this occurred decades before the 'Revolution' of 1964.

### The presentation of a political economy

However far the 'economic' and the 'political' are separated for the purposes of analysis and presentation, they must be understood as constituting one, indivisible social process. At the level of general theory Coletti (1972) has argued exhaustively that the different 'instances' of society – economic, political and ideological – are but heuristic devices, and that *social* relations of production must be understood as simultaneously ideological and political. In the case of the pioneer frontier it was stated that its expansion moves through a cycle of accumulation which is determined economically but which is achieved through different forms of political and ideological mediation. Only after locating law, bureaucracy and violence within this cycle of accumulation, that is at the economic level, can the frontier

*process* be understood. Moreover, this is specifically necessary in the case of the frontier where one major form of accumulation – primitive accumulation – takes place largely outside relations of production as such, and through the legal and political intervention of the State.

These remarks go some way to explain the logic of the 'order of exposition' of the analysis – which does not follow the logic of the 'orders of determination'. In other words, analysis at the level of economic accumulation (the 'primary' determination) does not always precede analysis at the level of legal and political mediation (the 'secondary' determination) but often follows it. This is partly because, as suggested above, things are not so simple as these 'orders of determination' may imply. But it anyway makes sense to discuss the political mediations first if they are necessary elements in the investigation of the reproduction of social relations of appropriation. The former are, after all, observable, and susceptible to analysis at the political level, using 'middle order' concepts; while analysis of the latter may require a complete conceptual framework capable of integrating the 'political' and the 'economic' (and this analysis is only reached therefore in the closing chapters of the book).

The order of exposition suggested here, and followed in the book, has further advantages in the construction of a political economy. On the one hand, this approach will reveal the struggle of social classes and social forces on the ground (and their specific interests in and response to the range of political and legal interventions) before posing the question of accumulation, and in this way avoid a mechanistic or 'economicistic' determinism. On the other hand, it will explore the internal structure and contradictions of the State (and their relation to particular economic interests and fractions of capital) before this is inserted as the political instance of a determinate social formation, so avoiding the temptation to fetichise the State as being monolithic, or as having some 'reason of State' which is 'above' and 'beyond' the political process of class struggle.

In this connection it should be noted in passing that for the greater part of the book the traditional usage of Brazilian social scientists and others is adopted in distinguishing between the local states (such as Pará and Paraná) and the Federal State, and in juxtaposing and contrasting their objectives and operations. It should be clear from the above, however, that *both* participate in the political in society, and both are necessarily implied in any theory of the 'State' in this society.

Such a theory emerges slowly through the progressive analysis of the different forms of mediation which are law, bureaucracy and violence, which are finally understood as characteristic of a particular

form of the capitalist State – the authoritarian capitalist State. The genesis and formation of this State are seen to be determined by its special relation to the economic in society: it reposes upon and guarantees the reproduction of social relations which are far from being homogeneously capitalist; on the contrary there exists a complex articulation of different modes of production. This heterogeneity at the economic level determines its primary political tasks of controlling labour and underpinning the forms of appropriation and transfer of surplus (often *across* modes of production). The appropriation and transfer of surplus from the frontier is one moment of this general process of economic accumulation. Moreover, this form of the capitalist State does not change over the period of the pioneer frontier; if the continuities at the political level are more important than the changes over this period, it is because 1964 witnesses a change in the form of regime, but not a change in the form of State.

It is impossible to anticipate here the full analysis of this State. All that can be advanced is the notion that this State, given its social bases, is incapable of mediating the rule of the bourgeoisie through mechanisms of consensus and consent (with mediations such as universal suffrage, equality before the law, representative institutions and all the other political attributes of a national 'citizenry'). In fact, the 'incapability' is not in the State, but precisely in the bourgeoisie, which – it is now broadly accepted – is not 'hegemonic'. It is economically dominant but not politically directing in the sense of forming the society in its own image. None of this means that this class must rule uniquely by *force* (although some contemporary appearances in Latin America might lead us to believe so); but it must use different forms of mediation, which both include violence, and which themselves may precipitate or catalyse the exercise of violence.

It is this State which intervenes on the frontier to promote and complete the cycle of accumulation, and through its legal mechanisms and the operations of its bureaucratic agencies acts to mediate the struggle for land. This struggle is nearly always violent, and it is the violence which strikes the attention on first approaching the frontier itself. The violence is integral to the struggle, both mediating it and resulting from it. Other forms of mediation reverberate with the possibility of violence. The classes in struggle live the violence unequally and view it differently one from the other. Violence pervades perceptions and practice on the pioneer frontier. It is with the violence that this study of the frontier begins.

### Violence on the frontier

The question of frontier expansion must be posed first and last at the economic level. Finally the process can only be captured within the conceptual framework of the cycle of accumulation which alone is capable of integrating into the analysis all the complex relations of the social reality. First of all, however, it is simply the economic process of the occupation of the land.

Peasants come to the frontier in search of land to settle and so provide for their subsistence. They and their families supply the labour to clear the land, which they claim by their occupation of it. The journey to the frontier may be long and hazardous and the work of clearing arduous. But the peasants have heard the word of the 'common land', the 'free land', the 'land of the nation' (Keller 1973), which they may take for themselves. They press forward in the hope of land to have and to hold. It is their activity on the ground which makes the frontier.

This initial occupation of the land combines abundant labour and land in a spontaneous growth of subsistence agriculture which requires neither infrastructure nor a market. The peasants clear a space in forest or scrub for cultivating the traditional staples (maize, manioc, rice, beans, plantains) or raising a few pigs. Farming is extensive, by slash and burn techniques, with little or no animal traction, and the hoe the only instrument of cultivation. Soon more peasants, perhaps relatives or friends, arrive and claim adjacent plots or buy or receive some of the land already claimed. As occupation intensifies so production increases and the peasants begin not only to produce for subsistence but to negotiate a surplus. Small 'centres' (*centros*) and 'villages' (*povoados*) grow up in such areas for marketing crops and providing basic services. These services include the sale of necessities and luxuries (kerosene, salt, hardware, alcohol, tobacco) and the many bars, hotels and brothels so typical of the frontier town. In short, it seems that occupation of the land will lead to settlement.

But the peasants' hold on the land is precarious and they may not enjoy possession of it for long. This precarity is partly intrinsic to the process of occupation itself, which sees a progressive reduction in the size of peasant plots as its intensity increases. This tendency for the small-holdings to become smaller may combine with a rapid decline in the fertility of the soil to cause crop yields to fall sharply after very few years. The weeds which were destroyed by the fire return and the land no longer 'gives'. This is the easily recognisable malaise of minifundio, which may force the peasant to move forward to the next frontier. But, just as minifundio can only be understood in the

context of the near monopoly of land-holding in the Brazilian countryside in general, so the precarity of the pioneer peasants' hold on the land is only comprehensible in terms of the *reproduction* of that monopoly on the frontier.

Peasants claim the land by their labour on it and occupation of it. Their claims are nearly always contested, however, by local land-holders, regional 'political chiefs', or more or less distant entrepreneurs. These large land-holders and big companies assert their 'rights' to the land against the 'claims' of the peasants, and attempt to appropriate the land which the peasants have occupied. Significantly the 'rights' of the economically and politically powerful will very likely not prevent the peasants' occupation of the land, but only facilitate their final eviction from it. In this way a prospective cattle-rancher, for instance, can profit from the peasant labour of clearing the land, by putting down pasture and raising cattle in place of people. In general, it is not only land which is appropriated but the value created by peasant labour in the process of occupation.

This pattern of appropriation is nothing new in the history of the frontier (a fact established in Chapter 4), and it is perpetuated contemporarily on the 'new' frontiers. The roads built from Brasília to Belém and Brasília to Acre, not to mention the Transamazônica, provoked a rush for land among entrepreneurs from Bahia, Espírito Santo, and Goiás, and companies and consortia from São Paulo, Rio Grande do Sul, Paraná, and even the United States of America. The peasants who laid claim to the land find that it is 'bosses' land', 'legal land' like that they left behind, and are forced to leave (or, more rarely, to do 'hired work'). But their pioneering activity was already a result of a monopoly of land elsewhere in the Brazilian countryside, which has today left an estimated six million peasants landless (*Estado de São Paulo* 1975). As land is their means of survival they cannot capitulate so easily in this unequal competition for land. They face the competition by clinging to the land, and the economic process of occupation becomes a political struggle torn by violence.

Academic analysis has not taken sufficient account of this violence. On the one hand, most discussions of violence in the countryside in general have referred to the extra-economic coercion exercised on the large landed estates (Andrade 1963), to the fighting and feuding between local political bosses (Pereira de Queiroz 1969) or to the era of the *cangaçeiros* (Faco 1965); on the other, the best known of the frontier studies have tended to ignore it. Monbeig's study of the coffee frontier traces the expansion of the large estates of the São Paulo entrepreneurs, and where he does encounter frontier settlement by small farmers it is in the highly atypical case of the north of Paraná,



which saw the most ordered colonisation ever experienced in Brazil (Monbeig 1952). Jean Roche, in his meticulous studies of the settlement of Rio Grande do Sul and Espirito Santo by German migrants and small farmers (Roche 1959, 1968), favours an analysis of the pattern of economic development and pays scant attention to its political context. Indeed, far from being presented as violent, the frontier has often been viewed as a 'safety-valve' which releases the social tensions in the countryside at large by providing possibilities for movement and improvement and so reducing the prevailing incidence of violence. Finally, where violence on the frontier cannot be ignored it is not explained, but simply classified as criminal (Fontana 1960).

In this respect academic analysis has not advanced beyond the dominant ideological view of the frontier violence, but has rather accepted the ideological categories as a true representation of reality. The purpose of these categories, which themselves resemble the nice distinctions of academic analysis, is to divide the frontier peasants into different *types* of social actor, and then blame the violence on one 'criminal' type. In this way the class nature of the struggle for land is negated, and the violence 'explained' at the level of the 'conspiracy'.

The pioneer peasant is known as the *posseiro*, and the complex range of ideological categories, which vary in time and place, have tended to coalesce around a broad but basic distinction between two types of *posseiro* (Foweraker 1974). On the one hand there is the *posseiro* who occupies the land not to cultivate it but to sell it. He is probably the first to the frontier and works to stake a claim (*posse*) which he can then sell to another peasant. This type is often referred to as the *desbravador de mato*, or 'forest-cutter', and in this interpretation does not remain long on the land, but shifts repeatedly from one claim to the next. The reality underlying the type embraces the many, mostly unrecorded, transactions where claims are indeed sold, not only for money, but for pigs, cows, revolvers, women, and other frontier currency. On the other hand, there is the *posseiro* who does not wish to sell the land but to farm it. He may arrive later to the frontier and buy a claim rather than stake one out for himself. He wants to work the land, has probably paid for it, and so will be reluctant to move.

The second type of *posseiro* is seen as more or less socially 'acceptable'. He works the land and produces. When joined by family and friends from his region of origin he will form frontier communities and begin to civilise the jungle. And, in fact, as many as twenty families migrate together and cluster in the communities of this 'domestic colonisation' (*colonização mansa*), which brings cohesion to frontier society. But the forest-cutter is viewed with more

ambivalence. He leads a wild and predatory existence and becomes brutalised by the nature of his work. He is confused, sometimes in fact but more often in fancy, with the criminals who escape society's retribution by living at its edge – on the frontier. Therefore if he is not criminal himself he is infected by an atmosphere of revolt and has nothing but contempt for 'owners'; in his work, possession of the land is its only true title.

Once these types are clearly established it is relatively easy to 'explain' the violence in one of two ways. Firstly, and true to the idea of 'conspiracy', it is possible to represent the 'forest-cutter' as a criminal minority, which will even engage in a '*posse* industry' (perhaps directed by 'subversives'), and invade land already claimed by others, or land which is in dispute, and afterwards sell it again, or demand compensation for withdrawal. Secondly, after recognising that frontier 'farmers' are prepared to respect boundary lines between claims, a more general 'explanation' can focus attention on the 'internal' antagonisms between the two types of *posseiro* with their contrasting behaviour patterns and contrary economic interests. Not surprisingly, academic analysis has taken up the latter, and supposedly 'structural' approach. Velho, in his monograph on Marabá (Velho 1972) speaks of a climate of violence existing between 'more marginal elements' and the farmers; and Monteiro, writing of the migrants of the north of Paraná, finds attitudes either of total conformity or of extreme unrest and revolt (Monteiro 1961). So the typologies which distinguish frontier farmers of 'good faith', on the one hand, who wish to develop a stable pattern of settlement, and the 'marginal minority' on the other, who revolt against the imposition of such a pattern, allow the latter to carry the blame for conflicts over land.

The peasant view of the violence which appears in the popular lore of the frontier is very different. In broad terms peasant perceptions are mystified but reflect their lived experience of subjection and exploitation. The *posseiro* is not seen as actively shaping frontier society, but, on the contrary, as passively moulded by the environment (Westphalen 1968). Just as violence is done to nature, so violence is done to men, and the rules of human interaction match the harshness of the frontier. The peasants do not refer to the misery of a life of bare subsistence, with no vestige of comfort or security, but to the prevailing economic activity on the frontier, which is predatory. In this aggressive atmosphere man degenerates, he attacks nature in search of survival but in the end 'it is the man who is finished'. Moreover, these perceptions are compatible with more general 'explanations' of the poverty and disease of the frontier population as the results of certain characteristics of the 'race' or 'blood' which make the peasant